

remains. But a better field for archaeological work was offered to me on my second expedition when, in December 1907, I was able to clear an extensive collection of ruined Buddhist shrines known to the local Muhammadans by the name of Ming-oi, the 'Thousand Houses'. They dot some low rock terraces jutting out from the foot-hills of the T'ien-shan to the north of the outflow of the lake.

The disposition of the ruins in long rows of detached cellas, varying in size but all similar in plan and construction, facilitated systematic clearing with a large number of labourers. Apart from the destructive effect of rain and snow, the temples had suffered much damage from a great conflagration. This, in view of the finds of coins reaching down to the ninth century A.D., may well have been connected with the earliest Muhammadan invasions which followed it. But in spite of iconoclastic zeal and climatic conditions the excavations were rewarded by plentiful archaeological spoil. The deep layers of debris filling the interior of the larger cellas and their circumambulatory passages yielded a great quantity of excellent small sculptures in stucco, which had once adorned relievo friezes on the walls (Fig. 127). The heat of the conflagration had helped to preserve them by imparting terra-cotta-like hardness to the plaster stucco which otherwise would probably have suffered badly from the prevailing conditions of the local atmosphere. From some of the vaulted passages we recovered interesting fresco panels which a timely burial had saved both from fire and moisture (Fig. 125). Of the lavish adornment with votive gifts which these shrines once enjoyed, there survived evidence in finds of painted panels and delicate wood carvings once richly gilt.